

## Perennials provide years of pleasure

A bed of established perennials blooming profusely in succession from June through September provides rainbows of color to the landscape and armloads of cut flowers for the home.

Such beds are virtually maintenance-free and long-lasting. They serve as a pantry of food for butterflies and hummingbirds, and a source of stem cuttings and root divisions to share with family and friends. Indeed, you can clone a perennial bed to live on for generations.

Perennials are surging in popularity with experienced and beginning gardeners across America's diverse growing regions. Perennials offer something to satisfy every taste — from the majestic Delphinium to the stately Oriental Poppy, to the whimsical ornamental grasses, with lots of nuances in between.

Because perennials live so long and take several years to get established, take care in choosing and preparing the planting site and selecting the right types and proper varieties to suit your needs.

Perennials typically are planted in the spring or fall. This is when bare-root stock is most widely available. Potted perennials are usually available

throughout the summer at garden centers. Some people prefer to buy and plant then because the foliage, flowers and habit of the plant can be studied. But, for diversity of choice and economy, bare-root planting in spring or autumn is the choice of experienced gardeners.

While some gardeners prepare their soil a season ahead, others plant just after conditioning the soil. You'll want to "build" your soil from the ground down, amending it by working two inches of Canadian Sphagnum peat moss into the top six inches of soil. Because perennials are a long-term investment in beauty, amending the soil is well worth the effort.

Amending the soil with plentiful,

sustainable sphagnum peat moss does double duty. Not only does it correct the pH of an alkaline soil because of its high pH level (3.8 to 4.5), it improves the friability as well. ("Friable" is a term that refers to a soil that is loose enough for water and air to pass through freely, yet sticky enough that individual particles bind together.)

A fistful of moist, friable soil forms a ball in the hand and then crumbles and falls apart when you release the pressure.

Fertility also is important, as most perennials do best when the soil is above-average in fertility or is "rich." Be sure to choose a fertilizer that works for your perennial, and follow manufacturer's instructions.

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## Tips for shady gardens

© Gardens made in the shade take less water and weeding and are more pleasant to work in. Here are some ways to enjoy shady gardening:

• *Study the shade patterns.* Make mental or written notes of what is in shadow or sunlight, morning, noon, and afternoon at different seasons.

• *Consider the soil.* If the shade comes from buildings, the soil there may be fill dirt left from construction with very little remaining topsoil. If the shade comes from trees and shrubs, their roots will compete with the grasses, ground covers or flowers for nutrients and moisture.

If drainage is poor, plants growing in shade can be more prone to root rot and other disease problems.

But all of these problems are easily solved by enriching and improving the soil with organic matter.

Doc and Katy Abraham, who write books and articles and do their gardening in Naples, New York, find that

Canadian Sphagnum peat moss is one of the best soil conditioners.

"We do a lot of our shade gardening in half barrels. We use a three-part mix of good garden soil, Canadian peat moss, and either builders' sand, vermiculite, or perlite," says Katy. This immediately eliminates poor soil or drainage and root competition.

• *Choose the right plants.* Redbud trees, flowering dogwood, Japanese maple, buckeye and evergreen hemlock all thrive in light to medium shade.

Ground covers such as ajuga, Bishops hat, euonymus or wintercreeper, blue fescue, wild strawberry, wintergreen, sweet woodruff, ivy, pachysandra and vinca do best in shade.

Annual coleus, begonias, browallia, godetias, impatiens, torenias and pansies prefer shade. Among the perennials, choose columbine, astilbe, bleeding heart, hostas, daylilies, iris, foxgloves, primroses and violas.

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